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ABSTRACT

The compensatory program in reading/study skills, writing, and mathematics at Northeastern University (Massachusetts) is described. An evaluation of the program's reading/study skills component during 1977 and 1978 is reported, demonstrating significant student improvement as a result of the program. Guidelines are offered to help other colleges and universities that are considering the development of compensatory basic skills programs. (RL)

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"Comp. Ed" in College-Can It Work?

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The term compensatory or remedial education is usually associated with public school efforts on behalf of skills-deficient students up to or through the secondary level. More recently, however, it has been used with reference to the needs of entering college freshmen and, in some instances, upperclassmen as well. College faculties across the nation have voiced concern about the poor quality of literacy skills displayed by freshmen students. A variety of arguments both practical and philosophical have been advanced to explain why these students can neither read nor write with the proficiency normally expected of them. Some educators attribute it, at least partially, to the impact of greatly increased television viewing; others see it as a legacy of the 60's when concern with issues more immediately significant than basic skills pervaded our schools and prompted a drastic relaxation of academic standards. The purpose of this paper however, is not to examine the polemics of the situation, but to describe what one university is doing to upgrade the reading and writing skills of its freshmen students.

Background

Northeastern University is a large, private, urban university located in Boston, Massachusetts. It is a cooperative university, organized on a work/study principle with a four quarter academic year. Each quarter comprises about twelve weeks. Approximately four years ago the University administration, concerned about the high rate of attrition among its freshmen, established a committee to examine several aspects of the freshman year and recommend changes to qualitatively improve the freshman experience. The committee comprised faculty and, later, administrators representing the major colleges involved with undergraduate education.

One area selected for study was compensatory education. Most faculty recognized that a large number of freshmen students were being admitted with seriously substandard language skills. Also, the Mathematics Department recorded its concern over the low level of basic mathematic skill demonstrated by many freshmen. After determining that several departments were trying to provide some remedial assistance for their students, but that these efforts were fragmented, the committee set about developing a more cohesive program with a standardized delivery system.

Initial concern focused on the need for improved writing skills. That many students could not construct a well-formed English sentence or write a well organized paper was readily apparent. Less apparent was the fact that many of these same students did not know how to read a textbook, take notes, separate essential from less important information, see relationships, or conceptualize in a coherent, logical fashion. In fact, the inadequacies in reading and thinking were frequently reflected in the students' writing. After much discussion, a program emerged designed to help students in three basic areas: reading/study skills, writing, and mathematics.

The Basic College Program

The program currently serving Basic College freshmen evolved over a two year period. Four colleges are presently participating; Liberal Arts, Education, Criminal Justice, and Boston Bouvé College (which offers programs in Physical, Health, and Recreational Education and Physical Therapy). Depending on needs identified by standardized and informal testing, freshmen in these colleges may be assigned to a reading study skills course (fall quarter); a two quarter remedial writing English course (fall and winter quarters); and/or a special mathematics course (fall quarter). Testing and selection of students for the program are discussed in the evaluation section of the paper. The courses meet for

the same number of hours as normal instructional courses, and carry the usual four quarter hours of academic credit. The same grading system (A-F) employed in most university courses is used.

Grouping

Once selected, an effort was made to group students according to the basic college course of study they were pursuing. This was particularly relevant in the reading/study skills and writing courses since it meant that these students were enrolled in at least one common content course which could provide a context for teaching the necessary skills.

Materials

Although appropriate skill texts were ordered for the compensatory courses, the reading and writing instructors used the text materials students were assigned in their content courses as extensively as they could. The use of content course material was an important motivational component; it helped students to understand the relevance of the skills they were learning, and facilitated transfer of the skills to the subject area courses. A special Study Skills area was established in the Curriculum Library to house professional resource materials for course instructors.

Program Administration

Major responsibility for administering the program was divided among the three departments involved in the delivery of services. These departments, English, Mathematics, and Curriculum and Instruction (which includes Reading), each appointed a faculty member to coordinate its effort and maintain communication with the coordinators from the other two departments. The most important liaison was between the English Department and the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, since they were frequently instructing the same students in related courses. These coordinators monitored their own staffs, and met together

several times during the quarter. They also arranged meetings between their staffs for purposes of discussing program objectives, sharing materials, and dealing with the problems of particular students.

A Second Model: The College of Criminal Justice Program

At the request of the Dean of the College of Criminal Justice, a variation of the basic program was instituted for thirty freshmen in Criminal Justice. In addition to the fall quarter reading/study skills course, they were given a second, follow-up course during the spring term. These students were enrolled in the two quarter compensatory writing skills course offered by the English department. Two Criminal Justice Teaching Assistants were assigned specifically to these students, and were given an orientation to the program at the start of the fall quarter. A special coordinator was assigned to this program and held regular weekly meetings of the two Teaching Assistants and the two reading instructors teaching these students. Additional meetings were scheduled to bring together all faculty instructing the students during the fall and spring quarters. During these meetings information regarding course objectives and content was shared. Ways in which instructors could mutually support each others' instructional goals were explored and in some instances, implemented. For example, it was determined that a research paper prepared by the students for their content course in Criminal Justice would also be read by the instructors teaching the writing skills course and would receive two grades - one for content, one for correct skills usage. Not everyone became equally involved. However, those who did reported considerable value in these interchanges.

The Alternative Freshman Year Program

Alternative Freshman Year

The program, housed in Northeastern's University College which offers continuing education courses, was designed some years ago for high risk freshmen considered not ready to pursue a Basic College course of study. During

their first year, these students may take fewer courses per quarter than the four normally prescribed. The first courses they take are typically geared toward improving reading and writing skills. Upon satisfactory completion of course work in this program, students may transfer into the regular Basic College curriculum. Students receive counseling through Northeastern's Testing and Counseling Center as needed.

Evaluation of the Reading Study Skill Component

In 1977 three colleges (Liberal Arts, Education, and Criminal Justice) participated in the reading/study skills course. All entering freshmen in these colleges were tested with the Iowa Silent Reading Test, Level 3E, Comprehension. Four hundred of these freshmen had been selected for a writing skills course by means of a writing sample. Of these four hundred, ninety-five who scored lowest on the Iowa Silent Reading Test were chosen for the reading/study skills course. Therefore, students were enrolled both in reading/study skills and writing skill courses. Pretesting with the California Achievement Test Level 5A, Comprehension, followed selection for the program. Using a pretest after selection permitted a valid comparision with posttest results. Incidentally, it was found that 257 students who had not been selected for writing skills instruction performed as poorly on the Iowa as did the ninety-five who were selected for the reading/ study skills course.

Students were instructed three times each week during the fall quarter in class sections of approximately fifteen students. Posttesting was with the California Achievement Test Level 5B. Sixty-seven students received both pre- and posttesting. California Reading Test results were reported in scaled score units to permit comparison across forms of the test. A correlated t test was applied to the scores. The results demonstrate significant improvements between pre- and posttesting (Table 1).

(Insert Table 1 here.)

In 1978 four colleges (Liberal Arts, Education, Criminal Justice, and Boston Bouvé) participated in the reading/study skills course. In contrast to 1977, writing performance was not considered when students were selected. The SAT verbal score was used for selection; the bottom 250 students on the verbal SAT were considered eligible. One-hundred-ten of these 250 were assigned to the reading/study skills course. The Iowa Silent Reading Test, Level 3E, Comprehension was used for pretesting during the first class session. Eighty-four of the remaining students appeared for pretesting at a time and place scheduled for that purpose. These students were to serve as a control group.

The treatment group received instruction three days per week during the fall quarter in classes of about fifteen students. At the end of the quarter, treatment and control groups were tested again on the Iowa Level 3E test of comprehension. Whereas 102 students in the treatment group were present for pre- and posttesting (done during class sessions), only 24 of the 84 control students appeared for posttesting which was scheduled during a common free period.

Iowa results are presented in Table 2. Both groups made significant gains that were approximately equivalent. It was not possible to attribute gains on the Iowa Test made by the treatment groups to the effect of the reading/study skills course, although class assignments showed development of specific skills.

(Insert Table 2 here)

Students enrolled in University College for an "Alternative Freshman Year" program participated in a study skills course that met twice a week during the fall and winter quarters. Of 173 University College students, 117 took for both pre- and posttests the Iowa, Level 3E, test of comprehension. Significant improvement was made.

(Insert Table 3 here)

Recommendations

The compensatory programs described above have as their common goal assisting freshmen to achieve proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematic skills so they may successfully complete their college education. Such programs may be organized in a variety of ways and many colleges and universities across the country have already instituted some form of compensatory education for selected students. The following guidelines may prove helpful to those schools presently considering the development of some kind of a compensatory basic skills program:

1. If a need is thought to exist, establish a committee to examine student performance. The committee should include faculty and administrators from directly involved disciplines; for instance, Education, English, and Mathematics department faculty with related expertise in teaching reading, writing and mathematics. It might also prove valuable to request student representation on the committee. Make use of resource people as needed: The Dean of Admissions and Dean of Freshmen, or their equivalents, can provide necessary information and assistance.

2. The extent and type of need can be assessed by:

   a) obtaining information about admission scores and attrition rates among freshmen,

   b) sending a brief questionnaire to faculty, particularly those with the opportunity to observe regularly the level of writing and organizational skills in students' written work,

   c) administering standardized or informal tests to freshmen in reading, writing and mathematics, which could conceivably be done as part of the admissions procedure for certain students,

   d) polling students, including upperclassmen as to their view of the need for such a program.

3. The organization and administration of the program must be determined by the particular needs and structure of the institution. Administratively it could be handled by:

   a) several departments in a cooperative venture as already described,
   b) a single department having the necessary expertise, for example, a department concerned with curriculum and instruction in a college education,
   c) a separate center or institute designed specifically to provide the services which are to be available to freshmen and/or upperclassmen.

4. The program itself could take several forms.

   a) Special instructional courses can be offered in lieu of regular courses in English and Mathematics.
   b) Skills courses can be taken in place of certain electives, with those electives being deferred until later in a student's program.
   c) An alternative freshman year can be provided in which the number of academic content courses is deliberately reduced to allow students to take necessary skills instruction. This type of program is briefly described earlier in this paper. It is similar in concept to the transitional year provided by some colleges for high risk students.
   d) It is also possible for one or more remedial specialists to work in conjunction with content course instructors, attending content sessions and meeting regularly with students to teach the organizational skills and techniques they require. Teaching Assistants, with suitable backgrounds, i.e. those in Education, could be taught to perform this function.
   e) Some schools might offer a special summer session for selected students to prepare them to handle normal coursework in the fall.

The issue of granting academic credit for compensatory courses tends to be controversial. Some professors are philosophically opposed to giving regular academic credit for such courses. While this position is understandable, our experience has shown that when credit is not granted students approach the courses with significantly decreased motivation. Obviously, each institution has to arrive at a system which is compatable with the view of its faculty and the needs of its students.

A major ingredient in planning and implementing a compensatory skills program is communication. It is vital that all those who will be affected in some way by the program be involved to some extent in its development. At the very least there should be a free flow of information. If concern for student needs can be kept at the forefront, an appropriate and successful program will result.

TABLE 1

Comparison of Pre- and Posttest Scores[a] of the Treatment Group.[b]

	Mean	S.D.	t	P
Pretest	581.9	71.1		
			3.100	<.01
Posttest	608.2	51.3		

[a]California Achievement Test Level 5 Achievement Development Scaled Scores.

[b]N=67

TABLE 2

Comparison of Pre-test with Posttest Iowa Raw Scores

Group	N		Pretest	Posttest	t	P
Treatment	102	Mean	22.1	25.8	6.371	$<.001$
		S.D.	6.4	6.7		
Control	24	Mean	22.1	25.1	2.660	$<.05$
		S.D.	7.1	7.3		

TABLE 3

Comparison of Pretest with Posttest Scores
for Alternative Freshman Year Students (N=117)

	Pretest	Posttest	t	P
Mean	23.5	25.5	3.204	<.01
S.D.	7.4	8.0		